

CHAPTER III: MIND-BODY MEDICINE

Integrative Medicine

Now how do these stress components, disruptions in emotion, cognition, and social relationships, affect our use of medical care? Well for one thing, they can disrupt our ability to adhere to medical treatment. We may avoid it if we feel alienated from others, if we're having difficulty processing information, or if a medical contact stimulates strong emotion. We may not make the best use of medical care, and many of the obstacles to good treatment adherence include the emotional fear, cognitive uncertainty, loss of control, and the sense that social support is now a stress and that people are taking control away from you. So they can make our ability to utilize good medical care worse rather than better. Now what some people do is turn to alternative medicine as an answer to this problem. I don't know if you can read the tattoos, but this one says, "Born to Cure, Heals Angels, and Disease Sucks." This is not the most positive image of alternative medicine, but this is what many people think of alternative medicine as being. I'm here to tell you that it is not, that people are seeking alternative medicine. It is used by 42% of Americans. They make more visits to alternative practitioners than to primary care doctors. It is used by 1/2 of cancer patients, and by the way, 2/3 of Californians use it; 2/3 of patients who use it don't tell their doctors. So it's sort of a naughty secret that can, in fact, interfere with doctor-patient relationships, and most people do both. So it's a secret, but most people wisely get conventional care as well as alternative care. People spend more out of pocket for alternative medicine than they do for mainstream medicine. People vote with their feet and their pocketbooks for something that they are not getting in dealing with the stress of medical illness. The main reasons they go are for problems that are not well handled in mainstream medicine, like pain and stress or mental health problems. The Kaiser experience and ours at Stanford is the same—2/3 are for pain or stress-related problems. He's saying, "I'm referring you to a colleague. He specializes in holistic medicine."

Why do patients use integrative medicine? They value the whole person emphasis, and this may help with stress and distress management. Being seen as a person with a problem not just a body with a disease state. They can be more actively involved in treatment. In fact, I think some of the appeal of alternative medicine is that it's considered slightly naughty. You're doing something that you're not quite supposed to do, and it makes patients feel more in control of their treatment. There are situations in which orthodox medicine doesn't work, has adverse effects, or in which there are problems with doctor-patient communication. People often use it for pain and other chronic symptoms that aren't well handled in mainstream medicine.